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ABSTRACT

Women wishing to promote themselves into the educational leadership positions for which they are qualified should concentrate their energies in three major directions--planning, presentation, and perseverance. This report recommends steps women can take in finding a satisfying administrative position in education. Accompanying comments include relevant employment statistics and job-hunting advice: (1) Determine strengths and areas of interest. (2) Prepare academically for administration. Women should not, however, expect college programs to prepare them fully for a leadership role. An independent study or an internship in administration may be the answer to obtaining needed coursework. (3) Presentation includes learning all the job-seeker can about the institution to which she is applying. Knowing each interviewer's name and special statistics about the school can prove valuable during the interview. (4) The final step, perseverance, implies the use of communication skills. Women should, for example, create networks among other women and among men for future information and contacts. The report concludes with a nine-item bibliography. (CJH)

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WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP:

PLANNING, PRESENTATION, AND PERSEVERANCE

Presented at the National Conference of:

American Association of School Administrators

New Orleans, Louisiana

February 22, 1987

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In 1928, women held 55% of public school principalships in this country - the majority, in small townships and rural communities where most principals taught at least half a day; female superintendents were virtually unheard of. Today, more than half a century later, they still are. In 1987, women hold 18% of the principalships in our country and 2.6% of the superintendencies.*

There are numerous factors which have contributed to the difficulty women have faced in attaining leadership positions in education. Consider the woman who is a summa cum laude graduate of a prestigious college, who holds a master's degree in administration, who has an outstanding teaching record, and who is asked in her first interview for a central office administrative position, "You do type, don't you?"

Realizing that old attitudes and traditions die hard, what can women do to promote themselves into the leadership positions for which they are highly qualified and deserving? They can concentrate their energies and activities in three major directions: Planning, Presentation, and Perseverance.

*Source of statistics:

American Association of School Administrators (1987). Arlington, Virginia.

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP:
PLANNING, PRESENTATION, AND PERSEVERANCE

STEP I: PLANNING

1) Determine your most positive and salient strengths; know what area(s) of your work interest you most. Are you good at planning, developing, implementing? Do you excel in human relations? Are you a good facilitator? Determine what is best for you, and concentrate your energy into improving in these areas.

Comments:

Many women who are in administrative roles today are there because boards of education were pressured into placing a token woman or two in such positions in the mid to late 1970s; often these women were initially selected for the role of supervisor because they exhibited good teaching practices in a particular subject. They were not selected because they exhibited potential leadership skills.

2) Prepare yourself for the positions that most interest you and for which you possess the basic skills required. Enroll in courses such as finance, personnel, governance, and law to help prepare for an administrative role. Apply for an internship in administration in your district.

Comment:

Don't expect college or university programs to fully prepare you for a leadership role. They offer courses that are most in demand or for which they have professors available. You may have to assert yourself to get the coursework you need rather than what they may offer. In such instances, an independent study may be the answer.

3) If you do not have a mentor, get one.

Comment:

Practically every superintendent or assistant superintendent you know has been befriended and advised by another person already in such a role. If you want to be a superintendent, choose a well-known, respected superintendent in your geographic area and call her or him and make an appointment. People like to help others achieve and most like to give advice. Not only can established administrators give good advice, they can put you in touch with other top level persons who may be looking for a woman with your skills.

4) Leadership can be learned. Learn all you can about leaders, their philosophies, and characteristics.

Comment:

There are several excellent books currently available on leadership; I have listed a couple in the attached bibliography. The lives of such people as Winston Churchill or Eleanor Roosevelt may not sound too appealing but valuable information may be gleaned from the experiences of such leaders.

5) Become increasingly aware of what is happening in your chosen career area; attend meetings and seminars, and read, read, read.

Comment:

Sometimes we get bogged down and bored with seminars and conferences. When you attend such functions, concentrate on meeting new people and expanding your opportunity through such contacts. Also, use this time to learn about what others in your career area are doing to improve their work. Stay current by reading the latest literature available.

6) Become politically savvy. Determine the issues most important to various constituencies. Practice listening techniques and study the body language of others to help you become fully apprised of a situation. Be aware of all sides of an issue. Get to know the people who control the purse strings.

Comment:

Developing political savvy is sometimes difficult for women because women have had few opportunities to be involved in top level decision making. It takes time, and often just gut level intuition, to become adept in this area.

7) If you decide to apply for a specific leadership position, do your homework. Without being obtrusive, find out all you can about the position and the institution to which you are applying. If you are called for an interview, prepare a few questions to ask during the interview.

Comment:

More on this later.

STEP II: PRESENTATION

Comment:

According to Dr. Joyce Brothers, "The first 30 seconds of a job interview are the most crucial."

1) When you receive a call for an interview, request the name of each person who will conduct the interview and the position each holds.

Comment:

Athough this may seem a bit aggresive, it is quite acceptable. Study the names and positions you are given and commit each to memory.

2) Learn all you can about the institution to which you are applying. Become aware of any special programs there. Keep an eye out for local newspaper articles on the institution or its personnel. Commit to memory such statistics as the number of students served, number of personnel, total budget, special programs.

Comment:

Such information will prove valuable if you use it during the interview.

3) Dress conservatively for an interview. Flashy earrings, clunky bracelets and patterned stockings are not appropriate. This does not mean that only navy blue or grey suits are appropriate. The most important strategy is to create an interesting image so people will remember you.

4) When you enter the room where the interview will take place, do so with a smile. Greet each interviewer with a firm handshake, make eye contact, and repeat his or her name. As you answer the question of each interviewer, repeat his or her name, if possible.

Comment:

An interview team will be impressed with your ability to remember the name of each person involved. This tactic lets the team know that you can concentrate under pressure. It also promotes your positive public relations skills - a characteristic most effective leaders possess.

5) Let the interview team know that you know about them and their institution. Mention newspaper or journal articles you have read concerning the institution, or mention a special program.

6) Prepare yourself to answer such questions as: Tell us about yourself? What strengths can you bring to this job? Why do you want this job? Where do you want to be five years from now?

Comment:

In answering these questions, concentrate on promoting your professional attitude. Avoid comments on any personal problems.

7) Sell, Sell, Sell! An interview is your face-to-face one shot chance - make the most of it. You must convince the employers that you are the special person they are looking for. Sell yourself as an asset for them. Convey the impression that you believe in yourself.

Comment:

Traditionally, women have not been prepared to assert themselves nor have they been taught to be competitive. Such behavior is sometimes difficult for women to assume and is also difficult for some people to accept.

8) If you interview with only one or two people and they attempt to dominant the interview, assert yourself.

Comment:

Don't let another person's ego spoil your chance for success.

9) At the conclusion of the interview, again shake the hand of, and repeat the name of, each person on the team. Thank them for the opportunity to be interviewed. Several days later, write a brief note to each and express your appreciation and continuing interest in the position for which you were interviewed.

10) When applying for a specific position, write a letter of interest even if one is not required. Be sure to include a comment or two about the institution in this letter.

Comment: An example of a suitable letter of interest is attached.

STEP III PERSEVERANCE

1) If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again - and don't internalize rejection.

Comment:

Traditionally women have been taught that if they act nice and look pretty, they will be rewarded. They have been taught by society to internalize rejection, which in turn, contributes to a lower self-esteem. Some women also suffer from what psychologists call the "lowered horizons theory"; they simply do not believe that they can accomplish much. Women can accomplish anything.

2) Don't close the door on an institution that may have rejected you the first time; keep the lines of communication open as another position of interest may come available.

Comment:

Persistence pays!

3) Network - the network men have used for centuries is real; there is no women's network, as such, but it is beginning. Use it. Correspond with other women and with men whose goals and interests are similar to yours; they have valuable information and contacts.

4) Maintain relationships with mentors and others in positions of leadership. Study them; observe those characteristics which set them apart and which are admirable. Note these characteristics. Study persons in leadership positions who exhibit characteristics you find undesirable. Note these, also. Such observations will help you "fine hone" your perspective of leadership and better articulate your personal philosophy.

5) If you are not a good speaker or not a good writer, take courses to correct either of these deficiencies.

Comment:

This seems to be a universal problem today and there are numerous resources to help one improve in these areas. People in leadership positions spend approximately 80% of their time communicating with others. Effective communication skills are a must for any successful leader.

6) Hold onto your dream. An important characteristic of effective leaders is their ability to envision a dream and make it reality.

7) Be aware that your professional goals may produce some positive and some negative effects on your personal life. Top level positions generally require much time and energy often at the expense of one's personal life.

8) Think about the future. Read and study the works of education futurists. Prepare for the coming effect of technology in our classrooms; attain technological knowledge and skills as they are an inevitable part of our world.

Comment:

Persons who know and understand the use of technology have a competitive edge in any job market.

9) Nothing succeeds like hard work - but such effort may be useless in the long run if others do not know about it. Promote yourself whenever possible; a healthy ego is found within a successful leader.

Comment:

Promoting oneself does not mean bragging or boasting and can be done in a casual and non-threatening manner. Knowledge can be a powerful element of promotion.

10) Stay active in some way in your community. Join clubs and other organizations for recreation and enjoyment to stay in touch with people who are outside your field.

Comment:

Persons who are effective leaders have outside interests which help keep them fresh and healthy for the job.

11) Treat looking for a new job as a job, itself. Job hunting requires much time and energy. You must work at it.

Comment:

The most well-qualified and respected superintendent you know worked hard to get the position she or he has today.

12) Don't give up the job you currently have in order to devote more time and energy to finding a new one; you are infinitely more marketable in a job than you would be without one.

13) During the next decade the growth of women in leadership positions will be dramatic. It is predicted that many more women will participate in such leadership roles as that of mayor, city or county commissioner, legislator, and school superintendent.

14) Know that you are not alone. There are thousands of talented and deserving women who aspire to leadership positions in education who are spending much time in preparation, who are facing the same attitudinal barriers and problems you are facing and who are feeling the same frustrations you feel.

15) Timing can be the all important factor in a job change - be aware of it.

Comment:

Borrowing a famous line from Thomas Carlyle: "Seize the living moment; the goal of yesterday will be the starting point of tomorrow."

Thank you for your kind attention. It has been a pleasure being with you today.

Dr. Jeri Fitzgerald
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SAMPLE LETTER OF INTEREST

Return Address
Date

Name of Superintendent
Address

Dear Name of Superintendent:

I am pleased to submit the enclosed resume in response to your recently announced position for Associate Superintendent for Administration in _____School System.

As a former teacher, consultant in the State Department of Public Instruction, principal and central administrator, I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with many students, parents, representatives of business and industry and higher education, and personnel from governmental agencies; in each case, we have worked together to enhance our schools and to provide a positive learning environment for young people. I feel that the varied experiences I have had in working in education qualify me as a capable candidate for your position.

_____School System has an excellent reputation; over the past few years it has come to be regarded as one of the finest school systems in the Southeast. In a recent publication, How Good Are We? Can We Beat the Odds?, I was interested to see that_____School System is experiencing considerable student growth - an unusual circumstance in public schools today.

I would look forward to working with you and the members of your staff as you strive to enrich the lives of your most valuable asset, the students of _____School System. I realize that the position of Associate Superintendent for Administration requires boundless energy, effective public relations skills, persistence, and often, just plain hard work and horse sense. I would be willing to make every effort to promote the positive relationships so necessary for success in such a role.

Letters of reference will be sent to you by several of the persons listed on my resume. I have enclosed copies of materials related to my work in public education and shall be glad to supply any other information you deem appropriate.

Thank you for your consideration of my qualifications. Best wishes to you and your colleagues as you continue to devote your talents to fulfilling the mission of_____School System.

Sincerely,